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Government Operations

House Panel Wants Notice of Office Closings

In an effort to clarify a Reagan administration plan to close perhaps hundreds of federal offices around the country, the House Post Office and Civil Service Committee June 26 approved a bill (HR 2401) requiring agencies to notify Congress 120 days before shutting down any office.

There are currently about 22,000 federal field and regional offices, ranging from the 15,000 run by the Department of Agriculture to three that perform investigations for the Office of Special Counsel of the Merit Systems Protection Board.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) included the outline of a plan to reduce the number of regional offices in a package of management initiatives that accompanied President Reagan's fiscal 1986 budget in February. The Civil Service Subcommittee tried to elicit details about the plan from agencies, but has received little response.

"I introduced this bill in frustration over the administration's refusal to provide any information about their ambitious plans to close hundreds of regional and field offices," said Rep. Patricia Schroeder, D-Colo., chairman of the subcommittee.

She noted that rumors of proposed office closings have circulated throughout the federal government, leaving federal workers uncertain about the future of their jobs.

For example, she said, thousands of Social Security Administration employees have heard that their field offices would be closed, but when Schroeder asked the Department of Health and Human Services about reorganization plans, officials made no mention of any plans to close offices.

The Reagan administration insists it should have authority to reorganize field offices, and argues that HR 2401 would limit its flexibility. In a June 14 letter to Post Office Committee Chairman William D. Ford, D-Mich., OMB Director David A. Stockman outlined the administration's strong objection to HR 2401.

"The bill, in short," wrote Stock-

man, "intrudes upon the president's responsibility for executive branch management, contradicts recent efforts by Congress and the administration to eliminate unnecessary paperwork and reduce the number of reports to Congress, and conflicts with the goals, shared by Congress and the administration, of streamlining government operations and establishing efficient and cost-effective management."

But Schroeder said HR 2401 was not intended to bar the closing of regional offices. "All it does is require agencies to share with Congress and the public the justification and analy-

sis of the impact of major field office changes," she said.

The 120-day time period would give Congress notice 30 days before agencies would be required to notify employees that they were about to lose their jobs through a reduction-in-force or to be transferred.

Sen. William V. Roth Jr., R-Del., chairman of the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, has sponsored a bill (S 1206) that would declare a 270-day moratorium on any field office changes, and require OMB to report to Congress on the field office structure and plans to change it. ■

GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS NOTES

Fire, Earthquake Protection

The House by voice vote June 24 passed two bills (S 817 — H Rept 99-90 Parts I and II, S 818 — H Rept 99-135) reauthorizing federal fire and earthquake protection programs.

S 818 would authorize \$23 million for the U.S. Fire Administration and the National Fire Academy for fiscal 1986. S 817 would authorize \$69 million in fiscal 1986 and \$72 million in fiscal 1987 for earthquake hazard reduction programs conducted by several agencies.

The Senate passed both bills April 17. The Senate version of S 818 provides \$22 million; the Senate version of S 817 provides \$70.5 million for fiscal 1986 and \$73.7 million in fiscal 1987. ■

Landsat Commercialization

The Senate June 26 passed by voice vote a bill (HR 2800) authorizing \$295 million to enable a private company to develop and deploy satellites to take pictures of the Earth, clearing the measure for the president. The House had passed HR 2800 by voice vote June 24.

Congress in 1984 (PL 98-365) authorized sale of existing Landsat satellites and receiving stations to a private firm, and authorized \$75 million for development of a successor satellite. Landsat data are used by the government and are available to the public for mineral exploration, cartography and agriculture.

Late in 1984, the Commerce Department accepted a bid from Earth Observation Satellite Inc. (Eosat), a joint venture between RCA Corp. and the Hughes Aircraft Corp., to buy the operation. The government agreed to pay for two new satellites, a receiving station, and launching the satellites on the space shuttle.

HR 2800 would enable the federal government to meet the terms of the agreement. It specifies that only \$125 million would be available through fiscal 1986. (1984 Almanac p. 195) ■

Clarification

Whistleblower Protection. Weekly Report, p. 1226, col. 1, 7th paragraph. The comments of K. William O'Connor, defending his role as special counsel, were not made at a June 18 hearing of the House Post Office Subcommittee on Civil Service. He did not testify at the hearing. ■

—By Robert Rothman